

Busch, Otto von. *The Psychopolitics of Fashion: Conflict and Courage Under the Current State of Fashion*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020. Bloomsbury Collections. Web. 22 Mar. 2025. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350102330>>.

Accessed from: www.bloomsburycollections.com

Accessed on: Sat Mar 22 2025 16:07:02 -03

Copyright © Otto Busch. All rights reserved. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Introduction

In 2012, not long after New York Fashion Week, a pop-up embassy appeared at the entrance of Parsons School of Design (Figure 1.1). The embassy for “The Current State of Fashion” allowed people to apply for passports if applicants answered a few questions and agreed to have their photo taken. The questions resembled an ID or visa application with the usual data about name, birthdate, height and such, and the back contained some questions sampled from the US visa form. The questions included whether the applicant has been arrested, is a drug addict, or has engaged in trafficking. But along the way the questions turned to fashion: had the applicant supported organizations such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) or Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), or advocated home-made, tie-dyed, patched or mended clothes? That is, was the applicant actually trying to undermine The Current State of Fashion?

It was quite obviously not a real embassy, but as applicants had to identify their skin-color on a pantone scale and were introduced to the border policies of the state, questions were being raised. Connections emerged between the seemingly disparate phenomena of states and fashion: who counts and who can become a full member of the community, where are the borders and how are they controlled, what goods and people are allowed to travel where? What really are the values of fashion if they are spelled out as constitutional documents and enforced through a state-like institution? Who rules in the realm of fashion and by what legitimacy, and are these rulers held accountable? How are the “dictates” of fashion enforced on people, and what rights or obligations do the citizens of fashion have?

The embassy was a starting point for a longer discussion about how to think of fashion as a state, a social system obsessed with who is “in” and who is “out.” Over the coming years a mode of approaching fashion appeared which utilized some basic concepts from political theory. The central themes became power, order, policing, and resistance, all set within a quite cynical framework of state regulation and, ultimately, violence.



Figure 1.1 Embassy of The Current State of Fashion at Parsons, 2012. Courtesy of the author.

Fashion is not alien to violence, as stories of worker abuse and deaths keep appearing in the news cycles on a regular basis. Yet it is important to also recognize that fashion, as a social phenomenon, can be violent. Indeed, fashion harbors and with subtle means even promotes violent social tendencies. Chanel is known for suggesting, “beauty is a weapon.” Anecdotal stories circulate of outraged citizens of Paris attacking Dior models wearing “The New Look” just after the Second World War (Arnold 2001: 4), and even in more recent times, people have been killed for their clothes and what they represent (cf. Schmidt 1990; Hermann 2012). Anxiety and fear affects the way people move in cities and how they dress depends on these contexts (Koskela 1997; 1999).

Historian Timothy Patrick Campbell (2018: 619) states, “In the long run of modernity, dress is the dark matter of aesthetic life—underconceptualized, difficult to fully see, yet always exerting its pull on us.” The “pull” of fashion is there, whether we want it or not. Fashion is a conflict, and it drags the wearers with it. With its wide spectrum of expressions, fashion is no longer a monoculture

broadcast like decrees from Paris. But this does not mean it has lost its power over its subjects. Even if fashion is more diverse and global, it does not mean “anything goes.” Instead, fashion today consists of micro-cultural multitudes of varying intensity, while still containing concerted trend expressions. Fashion is still “ephemeral, dangerous and unfair,” as Karl Lagerfeld (2007) argues, and it is a phenomenon most of us have to relate to as we are pulled into its orbit as soon as we get dressed.

As will become obvious, there is a narrative “we” apparent throughout this text. The book’s general assumption is that everybody is always already engaged in fashion, whether we think of it or not, or want to or not. All cultures engage in some form of modification of looks, and these practices are stratified and shift over time. But specifically in this text, as a rhetorical gesture, the “we” points towards a consumer subjectivity, where most consumers have some agency to assemble personal expressions from ready-made components and affect their look. Yet, as will be highlighted along the way, fashion is not equally distributed but takes place in a continuous conflict where the possibility of participation differs radically between abilities, races, sizes, attitudes, privilege, and is embodied into items of dress. Even if fractured, dispersed and unequal, there is still a paradoxical “we” of fashion consumers; those addressed by the system as potential consumers—people who better keep up and stay ahead. “We” are the *subjects of fashion*, the general population addressed in the advertising, even those who are not even considered citizens of The Current State of Fashion.

The general “we” in fashion points to this position of subjecthood; we do not choose fashion; it is *inflicted* on us. It imposes itself onto our lives with a certain force. Fashion scholar Susan Kaiser (2012: 30) argues we are all “forced to appear” and thus being perceived and judged for this appearance. There is no unmediated way of appearing, Kaiser highlights, and even if we may feel in control over our consumption, we have little say in the reception of our appearance. To “appear” before someone else means to be cognitively coded, to be socially determined, to appear “legible” to the means of aesthetic communication. To appear is not a neutral event, but is caught in a struggle on many levels; who is seen, by whom, coded with what signification, and in what form of appearance. To appear is a struggle over an unevenly distributed sensible field, where attention is sparse, coded with bias and charged with status and passions. Parallel to philosopher Jacques Ranciere’s (2010) notion of a politics of aesthetics, fashion is a struggle over expression as much as over sensation and participation in civic life; and these aspects are caught in struggles that entangle the decisions of the everyday fashion users.

The projects in this book turn to the playful yet very useful definition of fashion made by Swedish fashion journalist Suzanne Pagold (2000: 8) where fashion is “to dress like everyone else, but *before* everyone else.” The strength of this simple definition is that it suggests an everydayness of fashion, but also highlights the inherent conflicts in this notion; how fashion includes and excludes at the same time. But thinking of fashion as inflicted upon its users can also be taken more literally. Infliction, from the Latin *fligere*, “to strike,” means something hits the body like the strike of a whip, a whiplash. Like a passion, that which is inflicted upon the subject is something uncontrollable that must be suffered. It may be sought out, even desired, but is not entirely chosen. It is embodied, affecting the wearer who is socially embedded in a power-dynamic not under their control. This is the psychopolitics of fashion; the conflicts of desire and power, competition and rivalry, inner struggles as well as social gambles over positions and domination. The psychopolitics of fashion is about courting desires close to social dangers (von Busch & Hwang 2018).

As will be argued throughout this text, the notion of psychopolitics helps highlight the conflicts within the social enactment of fashion. Basing the analysis on the processes of social regulation, psychopolitics put emphasis on emotions such as envy and jealousy. As emphasized by French neuropsychiatric Jean-Michel Oughourlian (2012), there is more to the formation of the self than individual psychology. To Oughourlian, the formation and experience of the self is always affected by *inter-dividual struggles* and any understanding of the psyche must be seen as emerging from a *conflict between peers*. Thus we are all drawn into what Oughourlian calls “psychopolitics,” and many aspects of the self, which may be experienced as emerging from within, are heavily influenced by relationships to peers and rivals. Another perspective on psychopolitics derives from the ideas of cultural critic Byung-Chul Han (2017) who connects such politics to today’s auto-exploitation of the psyche. To Han, the biopolitics of Foucault’s discipline society have leveled up to push for a full inversion of freedom into a “positive violence” of ubiquitous self-entrepreneurship and competitive achievements, which are continuously quantified and compared through the transparency of social media. What both Oughourlian and Han highlight is that the psyche is a battlefield for inter-dividual and political power struggles, and this book unpacks how fashion is one of the theaters of war.

As will be argued later, the psychopolitics of fashion affect the formation of consumer subjectivity, a process that requires a perspective of rivalry, competition and struggle. The meanings and signs of expression are ambiguous and socially negotiated, and often appear with ambivalent claims about identity.

Yet appearance still makes claims about who I am, who I am not, who I may become, etc. People not only appear before others, Kaiser (2001) posits, but have to engage, to some degree, in a struggle to “mind” the social through their appearance, through the interface of dress. Some can care much or care less, yet most find it hard to totally ignore the social responses they face from our peers based on appearance. As Kaiser puts it, “few individuals are immune to fashion in contemporary society” (2001: 80).

The struggles over who and how one “minds,” appearing as much as being seen by others, take place under a system of distribution and an ideology of values. Attention, as well as minding, is distributed across the social realm in ways that manifests social power. The distribution of goods paired with the codes of interpretation take place within a state of infrastructure. This is obvious when it comes to access to clothes and brands, but also media and images, social platforms and attention algorithms. All these aspects affect the distribution of sensibilities and aesthetic as well as ethical discourse. The state of infrastructure, as much as the distribution of fashion sensibilities, is caught in a continuous struggle over influence and control, among institutions and invested interests just as much as by individuals. Yet, fashion consumption is not easily divided into the caricature victims versus subversive heroes that so often is portrayed in the media. That is, consumers are neither mindless fashion slaves duped by capitalist propaganda, nor stylish resisters and rebels disconnected from any influence or market. Instead, most are stuck in the many-faceted conflict zones somewhere in-between, doing their best to find a place that makes sense to them in relation to their peers.

Like any other state, the people who are within it only take notice of it when in conflict with it. States appear to our senses at borders or in the confrontations that produce victims of exclusion or violence. But it is also within its means that fashion becomes a struggle between peers and rivals, between in-groups and out-groups, between those who are “in” and those who are “out.” Fashion is a continuous struggle, and it often takes its most concrete form in school bullying, where clothes often act as an excuse for judgments, rejection and violence (von Busch & Bjereld 2016). The conflict of fashion does not finish after school though, but the same mechanisms continue to play out throughout life in the aesthetic “social combat” of fashion.

The projects throughout this book take as their point of departure *The Current State of Fashion*—meaning the condition of fashion as it currently manifests in consumer society, that is, the circumstances under which fashion appears in its everyday form. The projects play with the concept of “state” to

approach the present condition of the fashion system, but also as parallel to a sovereign state, or a nation state. With a twist, examining fashion through the lens of the state echoes the way anthropologist James C. Scott (1998) suggests readers understand politics by “seeing like a state,” yet here we will instead see fashion in the light of statehood, policing, identity-production and resistance. Not only are modern sovereign states, as we know them today, a relatively recent invention, appearing over the last four hundred years, but as Scott (2009: 40) highlights, states continuously struggle to project their power beyond the palace walls, out towards what he calls “state space.” This state space is the controlled environment through which it can extract taxes, energy and manpower. Yet, the state continuously needs to reproduce its self-image as the central agent and upholder of order in this “state space” in order to continue existing. For fashion to be influential, it also needs to project power into the world, not unlike state space. These mechanisms constitute the “state space” of *The Current State of Fashion*.

According to Scott (2017), the evolution of states is connected to the late history of the human species and its environment, and state history is a history of accumulations of domestications. Humans domesticate fire and plants, and later livestock and subjects, and the state continues to domesticate slaves and women in the patriarchal family and hierarchical order in its control of subjects. State domestication means making subjects “legible” for state extraction, especially by establishing dependency between state and subjects, as manifest in nutrition and livelihoods, which are “best suited to concentrated production, tax assessment, appropriation, cadastral surveys, storage, and rationing” (Scott 2017: 21). That is, for the state to survive, it needs to make its subjects dependent on it. As Scott has it, states emerge from what is extractable by the “tax man,” as much as from state hegemony, ideology and its “dispositifs.” It is in the double-action of these opposing jaws that subjects can be caught and pressured to work for the function of the state. And as we will see later, parallels can be drawn to fashion, between the local “policing” of fashion, and the ideology rationalizing the legitimacy of state power and the legibility of its subjects. Forces of statehood turn people into subjects, but also into willing and competing consumers where compliance translates into status. In fashion, it is aesthetic meritocracy that allows for social advancement.

As Scott (2017: 87) points out, domestication works both ways; humans make plants and livestock their subjects, but also humans become dependent on this relationship for their own survival. The state is caught in a similar bind, and also fashion with its producers and consumers, leaders and followers. Statehood is a

set of practical extractive functions, Scott argues, but also a narrative told about itself to make the state seem natural to its subjects, establishing a state-sanctioned worldview. Such stories change with time and context. In much of the current condition, state narratives have merged with consumerism: the state as a guarantee not only of modernity, but of shopping-as-usual. As Guy Debord (1983: 5) writes about the society of the spectacle, “The spectacle cannot be understood as an abuse of the world of vision, as a product of the techniques of mass dissemination of images. It is, rather, a *Weltanschauung* which has become actual, materially translated. It is a world vision which has become objectified.” The state of fashion is a vision of the world materialized through the enactment of fashion on the terms suggested and promoted throughout the statehood of the fashion ideology and its infrastructure.

A political perspective on fashion

There have been a series of studies examining the connection between politics and fashion, not least historical surveys of how clothing has been affected by state dictates (Guenther 2004; Paulicelli 2004). There is also an emerging fascination with the representation of state power, diplomacy and international affairs as part of an “aesthetic turn” in political theory (Behnke 2017). A common thread is that fashion and dress express political issues, not only in everyday individual and group identity, but also in matters of state politics. To understand international politics, unpacking aesthetics can help reveal the mechanisms of states as much as constitutions, institutions and speech acts can. Also cultural theorists have approached fashion from an angle of politics to highlight the connection between fashion and democracy. French theorist Gilles Lipovetsky (1994) argues for how virtuous fashion can be due to its fluidity of social references and mobility. Here, fashion is a blessing for democracy, mitigating social conflict as it “pacifies and neutralises antagonisms” (1994: 150). Under the reign of fashion, we can “take greater charge of our own lives, to assume more self-mastery, to achieve self-determination in relationships with others, to live more for ourselves” (1994: 148f.). It is the true independent subject of democracy, as fashion promotes “an ego that is more fully in charge of itself” (1994: 190).

Political theorist Joshua Miller (2005) partly aligns with Lipovetsky and argues that an overlap between democratic ideals, such as personal freedom, equality, mutual respect, and common action can be expressed in clothing, even if they also are in tension with one another. “The pursuit of perpetual change in

fashion is destructive to tradition and common ties,” Miller argues (2005: 9), “but fashion in the broader sense can also be useful to democratic movements.” Miller examines how fashion is part of free political expressions, negotiating messages, solidarity and provocations. At its best, fashion can foster respect for different dress and through this relationships that help manifest democratic ideals.

On one hand, Miller sees democratic potential in the expression dress and fashion allows. On the other hand, he still holds the critiques against fashion by Rousseau and Veblen as valid as it may fragment the social body politic. He acknowledges Xenos’ (1989) argument for a disconnect between desire-driven consumption and social and political action, especially in the modern context of continuously reproduced scarcity. As Xenos (1989: 95) sees it, through mass-production and affluence, modern societies have paradoxically created a social world of scarcity, and this is explicit in fashion, as “the stylish always possess a scarce resource independently from the things themselves they make fashionable.” Indeed, as Miller (2005: 13) posits,

Social inequality is often reflected in dress and appearance, and the rich, beautiful, and fashionable commonly use clothes to lord over social rivals. Fashion contributes to the blindness that prevents citizens from seeing each other as fellow citizens who are each worthy of respect.

Miller’s argument for taking on fashion as a political possibility for a democratic ideal reveals a clash of two almost opposing perspectives that are sometimes brought to attention in cross-disciplinary inquiries. The clash emerges from struggles within the disciplines themselves, but also this fracture risks undermining the possibility of a shared ground. Even if I will simplify this clash of perspectives below, it may help expose a prevalent difficulty of cross-disciplinary studies in fashion.

One perspective emerges from political science and examines fashion through the lens of political aesthetics, arguing that fashion is a subject worthy of serious study within the field of politics. Here, scholars struggle against a tradition within their discipline that treats fashion as superficial, apolitical or even dangerous to the civic realm. Indeed, for those used to studying constitutions and wars, fashion may appear trivial and ephemeral. Yet, from this perspective, fashion can be political, and politics dress fashionably: social movements dress to signify political struggle, or the dress codes of presidents and diplomats affect political processes. In short, state politics could be unpacked by a serious study of dress.

The other perspective comes from cultural theorists, examining the politics of dress from the realm of aesthetic signification, performance and practice. Here, the task is primarily to see how arts, culture and aesthetic expressions are infused by political struggles, basically informing or even weaponizing aesthetics to enforce or undermine power (Thompson 2015; 2017). The struggle within the field is against a tradition that has historically been a proponent of keeping a distance to allow “art for art’s sake,” but which already treats cultural expressions as if they are as important as state politics. According to this approach, dress can be understood by studying politics.

The risk appears as the two perspectives meet and each field infantilizes the other. Political scientists feel they “discovered” fashion as signifying something as a serious political signifier, and that they are the first to treat it with significant academic weight, while cultural theorists overstretch their models to force everything and nothing into politics. However, in the end, both camps stay with their own models and no new perspective emerges that can be helpful to bridge the disciplines.

A project like the one undertaken in this book walks a tightrope, and risks falling into one, or even both traps simultaneously. But it does so with a special twist as it takes an artistic and design-oriented approach to examine the psychopolitical forces in everyday fashion. It is a perspective meant to guide a creative and designerly approach to fashion, and not primarily promoting a political, sociological or cultural model for studying fashion. The idea behind experimenting with a state-inspired perspective on fashion is that it can highlight social and political tensions we may otherwise miss. These include aesthetic boundaries and their policing, illuminating the rivalry between peers and the social pressures that are employed also in the *design of fashion*.

Through the lens of a sovereign state, critique of the current model is also possible, and we can highlight how a counter-system could manifest itself. Just as much as it manifests structural processes of power, the model of a state also offers the possibilities of resistance and imagining more utopian forms of social organization, beyond the model of existing statehood. There is also the mobilization of a counter-current against the stream sweeping us all towards more and more unsustainable forms of competitive consumerism and social disengagement. Historically, the emergence of the centralized state was accompanied with imaginations of alternative forms of statehood. States were followed by parallel ideas of utopias, and using the state as blueprint for fashion may offer room to play with utopian states in more articulate ways. First we must, however, unpack the conflicting forces within the state of fashion.

Structure of chapters

Passions, conflicts and tensions may be immaterial, but design and art practice can manifest their presence. As mentioned, this book will unpack a series of design projects aiming to manifest fashion as a conflict that can be unpacked through the lens of the state. The argument will be structured around the projects, discussing possible framings and models to see how these tensions play out between subjects.

The next chapter, Chapter 2, will introduce a series of perspectives on the conflicts inherent in fashion, that is, how can we examine fashion as a social tension and political struggle between processes of inclusion versus exclusion. It is a tension that mobilizes the psychopolitical passions into a form of “positive” violence, hidden under the perceived shallowness and freedom of fashion.

In Chapter 3, the approach of this book will be discussed in the context of artistic research. The purpose of this type of inquiry is to invite participants to experience and engage in the inquiry and help articulate tensions within everyday dress. In order to promote this engagement with the subjects at hand, I have in the projects donned a series of masks to create conditions to facilitate unpacking the psychopolitics of fashion. Along with these masks, I have produced artifacts and environments and experiences that are meant to operate as “provotypes,” such as the embassy mentioned in the beginning, aiming to add new voices into the polyphonic dialogue of research. Masks and metaphors help express and articulate these approaches.

Chapter 4 examines the basic figuration for a fashion politics, a fictional state called The Current State of Fashion. Here, the purpose is to explore how fashion systematically mobilizes the passions of vanity and envy as part of its social contract. The state manifests in the *ordering of fashion*, and in how it is constituted through an ideology of sovereignty, boundaries, exclusionary value hierarchies and aestheticized forms of domination.

In Chapter 5, the micro-politics of the state are examined, or how micro-regulations take place to enforce the values of fashion into social relationships. To unpack this, The Fashion Police is a project that manifests and questions the everyday *regulatory mechanisms* of positive as well as negative fashion coercion. The rules, or *preos* of fashion, are naturalized into how people expect fashion interactions to work—who is “in” and who is “out,” as most of us recognize these demarcations through very subtle social signals.

Chapter 6 examines a project meant to expose, invert and displace these power relations with the shared efforts to build and utilize a Fashion Safehouse.

The purpose of the safehouse is to unpack the social aspirations as well as pressures that draw us into fashion, in order to facilitate experiments in *resistant environments*. Starting from the conundrum of autonomy, the construction of a safehouse materialized tensions between independence and interdependence in a series of workshops, where participants experimented in how to cultivate *relationships of mutual growth* by sharing counter-capabilities to fashion. Each environment tests the notion of autonomy in relation to fashion, while also pushing to displace fashion outside the walls of the safehouse.

Finally, the concluding chapter focuses on how to move from a violence of fashion beyond the celebration of aesthetic domination and bullying, to a mode of reflection, self-knowledge and a cultivation of self-esteem. The aim is to help displace the monuments of “success,” as embodied by celebrities and aesthetic autarchs, and instead form a “people’s history” of fashion struggles. Or rather, by examining the “unworn stories” of one’s unrealized desires, we may better understand what forces hold us back from realizing a more meaningful freedom of aesthetic expression. By creating a Museum of Smothered Selves, I have tried to unpack the state’s celebration of its heroes, and challenge this narrative through everyday monuments and a fictional museum to perished selves. Even under a regime of fashion, what room is there for play, and how can we move towards a more meaningful and “deep” engagement with the freedom fashion can manifest?

With fashion also come judgments, anxieties and fears, and the policing we bring with them. The irony of states is that in their eagerness to measure, tax and control, they also offer means for usurping power. At the center of the state are the cities, and in these monuments to taxation and population control also thrive the multitudes of insurgent ideas, the seeds of rebellion and the diverse expressions of possibility. These same cities are also the places where the expressions of fashion thrive. That is, a state also produces the room for its negation. In response to the projection and enforcement of the state space, freedom is also no constant or fixed position. Freedom must be the process of claiming and living freely, manifesting it in everyday experience. Similarly, we must imagine fashion primarily not as following decrees, but as the process of claiming and living fashionably, manifesting its freedom as everyday risks and playful transgressions.

This book aims to unpack fashion as a conflict, but also to help articulate how new models of thought when it comes to fashion can help *actively* make the current unsustainable reality obsolete. Ultimately, it is great that designers strive to “do less harm,” but we must also learn to add leverage *against* an unsustainable

model. Without seeing conflict, designers are doomed to reproduce existing forms of aesthetic struggles and modes of domination, making them even more present. Understanding the psychopolitics of fashion is thus part of a larger shift towards a more meaningful freedom of fashion, or what can be called a “deep fashion.” However, to start, we must unpack the foundation of fashion: the conflict ever present in the process of appearing.